

## **SUSTAINABLE DESIGN ASSESSMENT TEAM (SDAT) PROGRAM**

The SDAT program is an interdisciplinary community assistance program that focuses on principles of sustainability by bringing multidisciplinary teams of professionals to work with community decision-makers and stakeholders to help them develop a vision and framework for a sustainable future.

### **Background of the SDAT**

---

The SDAT program focuses on the importance of developing sustainable communities through design. It is modeled on the AIA's R/UDAT (Regional and Urban Design Assistance Team) program, one of the AIA's longest-running success stories. While the R/UDAT program was developed to provide communities with specific design solutions, the SDAT program provides broad assessments to help frame future policies or design solutions in the context of sustainability and help communities plan the first steps of implementation.

In 2005, the following communities participated in the SDAT program:

- Oklahoma City, OK
- Pittsfield, MA
- Northampton, MA
- Cache Valley, UT
- Forest City, NC
- Alexandria Township, NJ.

### **SDAT Principles and Values**

---

The SDAT program is based on an understanding of design as a process that:

- is integrative, holistic, and visual
- is central to achieving a sustainable relationship among humans, the natural environment, and the place
- gives three-dimensional form to a culture and a place
- achieves balance among culture, environment, and economic systems.

The SDAT program upholds the AIA design assistance team values of:

- a multidisciplinary approach
- objectivity of all participating team members
- use of public processes.

### **SDAT Results**

---

Many communities want to become more sustainable but are immobilized by conflicting agendas, politics, personalities, or even the overabundance of opportunity. Further, many communities have not yet taken stock of their current practices and policies within a sustainability framework; others have identified issues of concern but desire assistance in laying out a plan of action to increase sustainability. The SDAT process ensures that alternative solutions are given a fair hearing and that options are weighed impartially.

The SDAT process will:

- inform the community of opportunities and encourage them to take action to protect local and regional resources
- help the community understand the structure of the place at various scales and contexts—from regional resources to the neighborhood scale
- explore and articulate the larger contexts and interactions of ecological, sociological, economic, and physical systems
- visualize potential futures
- recognize and describe the qualities of a place by preserving the best elements of the past, addressing the needs of the present, and planning for the needs of future generations;
- identify and describe choices and consequences
- connect plans and actions
- advance the principles of quality sustainable communities
- help the community define the roles of various stakeholders
- develop a road map for the implementation of more sustainable policies and practices.

### **SDAT Participants**

---

The key to SDAT success is diversity and participation; the process involves multiple disciplines and multiple stakeholders. The SDAT process includes not only the national team but also government agencies and officials, private businesses, schools and students, community members, and other parties as appropriate.

**AIA Center for Communities by Design and Other Partners**—The AIA Center for Communities by Design manages and staffs the program. The AIA also partners with other organizations (such as the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, the American Society of Landscape Architects, and the American Planning Association) as appropriate.

**SDAT Application Review Panel**—The Application Review Panel includes leaders from the AIA Center for Communities by Design, a representative from the AIA Committee on the Environment (COTE), a public representative (current or former elected official), and other representatives as appropriate.

**Team Members**—SDATs bring a team of highly respected professionals to work with community decision-makers to help them develop a vision and framework for a sustainable future. Team members are selected based on their experience with the specific issues facing the community. These experts are from across the United States and volunteer their time to be a member of the SDAT. To further ensure volunteer objectivity, team members agree to refrain from taking work for three years from the date of completion of the SDAT.

The lack of bias, the professional stature of the team members, and the pro bono nature of the team's work generates community respect and enthusiasm for the SDAT process. This process encourages the participation of stakeholders in the community. The passion and creativity that are generated by a top-notch multidisciplinary team of professionals working collaboratively can produce extraordinary results.

For each SDAT project, a team is assembled based on the project's unique issues. A typical team consists of a team leader and five to seven team members (depending on the scope and type of project). Also an AIA staff person is assigned to each SDAT.

**Local Steering Committee**—The steering committee is the key local organizing group for an SDAT project. It is responsible for assembling local and regional information, organizing the preliminary meeting and SDAT visit, and generating local media coverage during the entire project.

## **SDAT Project Phases**

---

### **1. Preliminary Visit**

Once the communities have been selected, the AIA Center for Communities by Design commences discussions with the local steering committee. The SDAT leader is selected and then a preliminary visit to the community occurs that includes the team leader and a staff member (an additional team member may attend in some instances). The meeting is typically conducted over a day and a half well in advance of the SDAT visit.

### **2. Preparations for the SDAT Visit**

After the AIA forms the national team, a local technical committee is formed and sends background information to the national SDAT team in preparation for the team visit. The information provided to the national team should include local as well as regional overviews about topography, geology, hydrology, codes, climate, maps, neighborhood types/stability, demographics, economic factors, and other relevant subjects. This information is sent well in advance of the SDAT visit. In addition, the steering committee is responsible for organizing the public participation for the visit and including multiple perspectives from the community. The local steering committee also plays an active role in generating media coverage.

### **3. SDAT Visit**

The SDAT visit spans three days and is held in a facility that contributes to an open process and discussion. Scheduling of the visit depends on the availability of team members and other SDAT projects. During the visit, the SDAT team tours the project area, reviews additional materials, and interviews stakeholders and the public. Based on the information collected, the team develops recommendations on how the community can become more sustainable. The visit includes time to interact with participants as well as dedicated work time for the team.

On the last of day of the visit, the team will present their recommendations to the steering committee and residents. The presentation will include observations on challenges and strengths, as well as recommendations and a basic action plan. The recommendations will have an audit or assessment focus. The SDAT will also, where possible, tie their sustainability recommendations into existing local government regulations and policies so as to contribute to a comprehensive approach. The final report (approximately 15 to 20 pages) will be submitted to the steering committee within 45 to 60 days of the SDAT visit.

### **4. Follow-Up Conference Call**

Six months after the delivery of the final report, the steering committee and team will undertake a conference call. The purpose of the call is to review the project's progress and address issues. Prior to the conference call, the team leader and AIA staff will be available to answer questions.

## 5. One-Year Assessment

One year after the SDAT visit, selected members of the team will revisit the community to undertake an assessment. Typically it is a one-day roundtable event that includes the steering committee, SDAT representatives, and local groups and advocates. Questions will be addressed, the project's progress will be reviewed, and recommendations will be updated if needed.

## SDAT Application and Review Process

---

Interested communities that would like to apply to be an SDAT project are required to complete the Self-Assessment Checklist and submit an application using the Application Guidelines. Applications are to be returned to the AIA Center for Communities by Design.

AIA local components and their committees should be involved in the organizational and self-assessment effort and help coordinate with local universities and other organizations. Ideally, local components will lead the assembly of a steering committee for the effort. In any event, the local or state AIA components must indicate their support in order for an application to receive a favorable review.

The Application Review Panel will analyze communities according to:

- types of problems to be addressed, range of issues
- local commitment and support—public and private sectors
- political will to address issues of sustainability
- local matching funds and logistical support
- self-evaluation/assessment regarding issues and opportunities
- timing (in the decision-making process).

The review panel will review the 2006 SDAT applications in early January 2006. The AIA Center for Communities by Design may contact applicants with follow-up questions or conduct a site visit if necessary. Final decision on acceptance/denial of each community's proposal for the 2006 applications will occur by February 13, 2006, at which point we will begin to notify and begin work with the selected localities. The AIA will award seven SDATs in 2006.

\* Applications for 2006 SDATs must be received at the AIA by 11:59 p.m. on January 6, 2006.

## Costs of the Program

---

In 2006, each project will cost approximately \$20,000 to \$30,000. The AIA will provide \$15,000 in grant funds and the participating community will be expected to provide an in-kind monetary match of \$5,000. Funds may be raised from public and private sources that might include businesses, local government, nonprofits, foundations, organizations such as the chamber of commerce, arts councils, the local AIA component, and other groups and individuals.

## More Information

---

For more information about the SDAT program, visit [www.aia.org/liv\\_sdats](http://www.aia.org/liv_sdats) or contact Ann Livingston, Esq., director of the Center for Communities by Design, [alivingston@aia.org](mailto:alivingston@aia.org) or 202-626-7405.

## SELF-ASSESSMENT CHECKLIST

This checklist is intended to help your community determine its potential for benefiting from a successful SDAT process.

### Mission

- What is the specific mission you wish to achieve through the SDAT process?
- Is the scope of the mission appropriate?
- Does it address the critical issues and concerns facing your community in the context of sustainability?
- Based upon what you know about your community and the SDAT process, why do you believe the SDAT process will help you achieve your mission?

Think about the overlapping realms of environmental, social, and economic issues and consider how the following topics relate to one another and to the project mission. (SDATs will expect to consider at least two topics in each of the three areas when developing the final scope of the SDAT—solving interrelated problems is often more effective than looking at issues as isolated problems.)

#### Environmental

Air quality  
Water quality/quantity  
Open spaces  
Wildlife habitat/wetlands  
Flooding and drought  
Natural disaster  
Transit and land use  
Energy efficiency  
Flooding and drought

#### Social

Housing/affordability  
Public spaces  
Ethnic/racial issues  
Demographic/income shifts  
Education  
Sense of community/place  
Pedestrian/bicycle options  
Access to jobs/housing  
Managing growth

#### Economic

Revitalization  
Diversity  
Jobs  
Public services  
Public policy/planning  
Agricultural preservation  
Traffic congestion

## Examples of Types of Issues an SDAT might address

### Cache Valley, Utah: Valley on the Verge

This community is facing extreme development pressure along its South Valley Corridor. Its location adjacent to a primary transportation route, the scenic and aesthetic qualities of the area, and its close proximity to city services and amenities have proven attractive to both commercial and residential developments. This rapid and piecemeal expansion is threatening the integrity of the built and natural environments of the area; air and water pollution are major issues and agricultural lands are under development pressure. The community recognizes the need for a policy document that would promote sustainable development and prevent irreversible damage to the environmental, social, and economic character of Cache Valley.

### Forest City, North Carolina: Weaving Together Community Betterment and Design

This community hopes renovation and conversion of its historic textile mill into a mixed-use development project will create momentum to revitalize the city's central core and create a sustainable economy. Residents and leaders are seeking ways to develop and nurture programs and policies that will enable the city to create the future it envisions.

### Pittsfield, Massachusetts: Sustainable Urbanism in the Heart of the Berkshires

This community is looking to create a more diverse economic base that encourages cultural tourism and strengthens the presence of art and artists in the community. After years of reliance on a single national manufacturer that has resulted in water pollution and the impairment of the environmental integrity of the waterfront, Pittsfield is looking to attract new and diverse



residents, encourage tourism by expanding the city's cultural resources, and diversify employment opportunities in the area.

#### *Oklahoma City: Industrial Transformation*

This community hopes to revitalize the Reno corridor of the city. The area contains heavy industry and contaminated land. Extensive redevelopment is planned for this area, which acts as a transportation gateway into downtown Oklahoma City. The Reno corridor possesses a unique set of opportunities as well as a number of planning and sustainability challenges. The community hopes to develop a road map for sustainable growth that will allow for the growth of economic opportunity and environmental quality in the area while preventing unplanned and inappropriate development.

#### **Project Area**

- How will you describe the set of issues you hope the SDAT will focus on, as well as the size and complexity of the geographic area you want to address?
- Is the project area one centralized place or is it several overlapping areas such as a core area that requires a specific area plan, a municipality, or an even larger area such as a region?

#### **Participant Outline**

- Who will be affected by the project outcome?
- Name the key individuals, organizations, institutions, and government agencies that should participate in the SDAT process and their relationships to the project mission.
- What are the issues or problems each participant group or individual wishes to address, and what outcome would they like to see that would create a winning situation?
- Which community decision-makers and leaders will help you to implement (or block) strategies for improving your community?

#### **SWOT Analysis**

Think about:

- What are your community's notable strengths that will be important assets as you undergo the SDAT process and implement the recommendations?
- What are the weaknesses or internal factors that add to or detract from your community's competitive advantage and environmental and social conditions compared with other similar communities?
- What are your community's opportunities (such as impending legislation or recent advocacy efforts) that might affect the success of the SDAT?
- What threats (such as external factors that can affect the community's success, e.g., regulations, economic trends, demographic changes, or natural hazards or disasters) to the process exist?

#### **Community Commitment to the SDAT Process**

The purpose of this analysis is to help your community assess its ability to fund, coordinate, and manage the SDAT process.

- Do you need to gain the approval for the SDAT process from your governmental body, the community, or a specific neighborhood?

- Have you identified the resource individuals, organizations or entities that will help to develop information for and participate in the SDAT process? For example, do you need to assemble information resources in the areas of environmental conditions, transportation, economics and market conditions, and political support, among other considerations?
- Is your schedule (to prepare, conduct, and follow up on the SDAT process) realistic? Can you commit to the time required to produce a successful SDAT process and product?

## APPLICATION GUIDELINES

### Project Title

Include the name of the community in a short project title, such as:

Cache Valley, Utah: Valley on the Verge

Forest City, North Carolina: Weaving Together Community Betterment and Design

Pittsfield, Massachusetts: Sustainable Urbanism in the Heart of the Berkshires

Oklahoma City, Oklahoma: Industrial Transformation

### Contact Person(s)

Include the name, address, phone and fax numbers, and e-mail address for the chair(s) of the steering committee. Naming cochairs of the steering committee is recommended. One of these should be designated the primary contact.

### Community Description

(approximately one to two pages)

Include a brief history, population figures, demographics, economic information, form of government description, geography/topography data, and anything else you think is pertinent. Be sure to include information on regional setting (context) and influences. Necessary graphic materials include maps, study-area site plans, photos (especially aerial views), and diagrammatic maps showing locations and concentrations of specific community features and needs.

### Description of the Issue(s) to be addressed by the SDAT—Problem Statement

(approximately two to five pages plus maps)

Define and describe the proposed study area. Be as specific as possible about the nature and scope of the issues you wish to address. Describe why they are critical to your community. Describe how these issues relate to development concerns at the regional, municipal, and neighborhood scales. Be sure to include information on the surrounding county if the proposed study area is a municipality.

Identify the barriers (physical, social, economic, political) that have limited the community's ability to address its concerns or agree on solutions. Include an assessment of your community's most significant needs (e.g., water supply concerns or public health issues). Tell us about any past attempts that have failed to resolve community issues. Include as much graphic material as needed to describe existing conditions.

### Objective of SDAT Process

(approximately 300 words)

State what measurable results you hope the SDAT process will help you achieve and how this process fits within other community planning and development efforts. Try to avoid repeating the problem statement

### Budget and Funding Sources

Your community should be prepared to raise at least \$5,000–\$15,000 (in 2006, the AIA will provide a grant of \$15,000 to be applied towards the costs of each project and most projects will



cost approximately \$20,000–\$30,000). Your community will be responsible for a monetary match of \$5,000 and any costs above \$20,000.

Identify specific potential donors (and amounts where possible), cash to be raised (and potential sources), and possible sources of in-kind contributions. All sources do not need to be identified by name at this time, but you should demonstrate a reasonable sense of funding feasibility.

---

### **Timetable for the Team Visit(s)**

Identify target dates for the preliminary visit, the team visit, and the follow-up. Include any special reasoning that may affect the timing of any part of the process (e.g., six months before scheduled comprehensive plan revision). Bear in mind that there will be a space of time between approval of the application and the team visit and that the dates may be adjusted based on program needs and availability of team members.

---

### **List of Steering Committee Members**

Provide addresses, affiliations, telephone and fax numbers, and e-mail addresses for all steering committee members. Be sure that your steering committee represents all of your community, not just a few select groups. Both public and private sectors should be well represented. Also, show how you will organize into subcommittees to plan and implement the SDAT.

---

### **Student Resources**

Provide the name(s) of participating architecture, urban design, landscape architecture, or environmental studies schools and faculty contacts (name, address, phone fax numbers, e-mail address). Include a letter of commitment from the school(s). The faculty member(s) should be consulted and agree to coordinate student participation during the team visit, if a school is participating. (Educators may want to use the SDAT as a part of a studio or class project.)

---

### **Media Plan**

Include an outline of your media plan with a list of local media outlets and contacts.

---

### **Attachments**

At a minimum, include as many letters of support as possible from community leaders, neighborhood groups, churches, businesses and institutions, the mayor or town manager, public agencies, and the local AIA component; maps and study area site plans; and photos, especially aerial views. Diagrammatic maps showing, for example, locations and concentrations of specific community needs can also be helpful. Feel free to include other materials that will describe your community, such as newspaper articles covering key issues, tourism materials, and brochures from the chamber of commerce or local economic development agency. These materials will help the review team understand your community and the issues that need to be addressed.

**Six complete hard copies of the application and a CD containing a PDF of the application should be sent to:**

SDAT Program Director, Center for Communities by Design  
The American Institute of Architects  
1735 New York Avenue NW  
Washington, D.C. 20006-5292

**Questions about the application should be directed to:**

**Ann Livingston, Esq., Director, Center for Communities by Design**

202-626-7405 tel

202-626-7527 fax

[alivingston@aia.org](mailto:alivingston@aia.org) e-mail